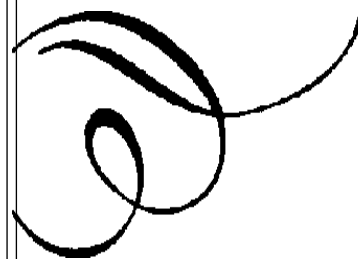


WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

*by Linda Swisher,
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Have you ever read a newspaper and wondered how the advertisements fit next to the stories? Have you watched television and thought, “How do they sandwich the commercials between the shows?” Surprise No. 1: advertising drives the media. News is written to fit around advertising.

Have you ever been upset at something appearing in the paper or on television, and threatened to pull your subscription, or change the channel? Surely the media outlet won’t want to lose you! Surprise No. 2: publishers hate to lose subscribers, and station managers hate to lose viewers, but their bottom line isn’t affected until they lose advertisers.

If you call a newspaper to “place an ad,” you’ll be transferred to the advertising department. Surprise No. 3: your event may run for free, if you submit a media release.

ADS VS. MEDIA RELEASES

Know the difference between an advertisement and a media release. Ads are paid spaces — inches of space in print media (newspapers or magazines), or blocks of time in broadcast media (radio or television). Buying an ad guarantees its appearance. You might be able to request that your ads run at certain times, or on certain pages.

Ads aren’t always expensive. Many papers fill empty space with “filler” ads from the American Cancer Society or other nonprofits. Will the paper use a filler ad on the library? Your paper may run free public service ads, or “random” ads placed at its convenience, but costing substantially less than the regular price. The paper may publish a special section, or “tab,” where you provide content, while the paper sells ads to businesses to cover the cost.

Although media releases are published for free, there is no guarantee when, or where, or if the news will appear at all. If that’s so, why use media releases? Three main reasons are:

- Price. The only cost is postage. More outlets now

accept releases sent electronically.

- Perception. Readers feel that ads are solicitations, whereas any typed copy is “news.”
- Publishing process. Reporters and editors get story ideas from releases, but they may not see an ad until after the paper is published.

WRITING THE MEDIA RELEASE

The media (or news) release has an accepted format: it is always typed (handwritten releases look amateurish), double-spaced (to leave room for editor’s marks), on 8½-by-11-inch paper (smaller sizes are easily misplaced). Begin with the name and phone number of the library employee whom the media may contact for information or clarification.

Type “For immediate release” unless you want the news “embargoed” until a certain date. If the winners of a contest will be announced at an Aug. 30 dinner, your release lists the winners but instead of “For immediate release,” you say, “Please embargo until Aug. 31.”

After the words “For immediate release,” add “in all zones” if your paper publishes several editions and has arbitrarily divided the geographic area it covers into “zones.” “Zoning” is frustrating if your library system and lecture series span more than one zone. If Anytown is in Zone 1, a lecture at the Anytown branch runs only in Zone 1 editions. If the next lecture in the series is at the Smithville branch, which is in Zone 2, the notice may run only in Zone 2. It’s hard to build attendance when the series is not publicized in each edition.

Write the media release as an “inverted pyramid.” Pertinent facts are placed near the top, so the story can be cut from the bottom up without losing important information. Your “lead” or summary sentence should entice the editor into reading the release. Mention the “five Ws” (who, what, where, when, why) and an H (how, or how much). Include instructions. Must readers or listeners register, pay a fee, dress comfortably, bring paper and pen, or use the west door? Avoid library jargon, or superlatives such as “unique” (few events are unique), and explain unfamiliar terms or acronyms.

If the release continues to a second page, type “more” at the bottom of page one. At the top of page two, type identifying information so that if pages become separated, an editor can figure out what pages go together. Include a name or phone number that people can call for information. (This is not always the same contact as the one at the top of the release.) After the last line, indicate that the release has ended by typing “—30—” or “# # #”.

THE PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

A Public Service Announcement (PSA) is written in a conversational tone to fit in a particular block of air time, e.g., 30 seconds. A PSA is sent to a station’s public service or public affairs director to be used on a community calendar. You may have to submit your own videotape. Some cable stations use a scrolling marquee, and you must submit your news on a form comprised of a grid of little boxes.

SUBMITTING THE MEDIA RELEASE

Releases are usually mailed. Some outlets now accept e-mail. Ask the editor. If an editor can copy and paste news into his files, it saves time and there is less chance of error.

Type once, send twice. Structure a release for both postal and electronic mail. Type the release on library letterhead, and again include the library’s name, address and phone number in the body of the release. Save the file. Copy and paste the release as straight text into the body of the e-mail. The paper may be unable to open your attachment. Include your e-mail signature: name, title, e-mail address, library name, address, phone number, and URL.

If you want media coverage for your event, note this in large letters at the top of your release, or call the editor several weeks in advance. Don’t come to the paper without an appointment, as the editor may be on deadline. Unlike baseball relief pitchers in the bullpen, reporters and photographers are not waiting to be called upon. Since they don’t usually travel together, a photographer and reporter may visit your library at different times. Reporters may interview you over the telephone, rather than in person. Even if a news editor makes a photo assignment, a photo editor schedules the photo staff and decides which assignments to shoot. Assignments may be killed for evenings, weekends, elections, sporting events, or breaking news stories. At a small paper, one person may be both the reporter and photographer.

Do not ask a reporter, editor or photographer to: show you the story or photos before publication (it’s usually against policy); tell you when the story/photo will run (they may not know; and a story can be

“bumped” to a later date, or killed altogether); call you when the story/photo will run (you must search the paper); send you copies of the story/photo (if it’s a front-page story, they may give you a few copies; otherwise, expect to pay); and rerun the entire story if they err (they should run a correction, although most people won’t read it).

SUBMITTING PHOTOS

The media may use your photos, especially at a small paper with limited staff. Look at your paper to see how photos are used. Most photos are horizontal. Your photo should contain only four or five people, rather than a “group shot.” Photograph the subjects doing something, rather than standing in a row. Compose your photo so that it is “tight” (from the head to the shoulders or waist) rather than from head to toe, which is an image too small to be legible in print. Make sure all faces are visible. Don’t place subjects in front of a mirror or a loud wallpaper, or so the flagpole appears to be coming out of the top of the subject’s head.

Avoid using traditional Polaroid photos, as they are too dark to reproduce well. If the photo is a good one, make copies from the film negative or photo disk.

Black and white prints were the norm, but color prints are usually acceptable. Ask if your paper accepts e-mail photo attachments. Does it require a particular file format, such as .eps (encapsulated postscript) or .jpg (Joint Photographic Experts Group)? Note in the subject line your library’s name (not just “library news”), and if photos are attached.

If including photos, write captions. Identify people from left to right, top row and bottom row, standing and seated, clockwise from top, etc. Describe what your subjects are doing, or why they are being photographed. Either type the caption on a label and affix to the back of the photo, or use double-stick tape to attach the photo to letterhead on which you’ve written a caption. Don’t write on the front or back of a photo; indentations render it useless. If e-mailing photos, captions should refer to a photo’s file name: “Caption for Library1.jpg: Left to right, Library director, Jane Doe, greets the visiting Senator Sam Smith.”

Use your subject’s complete name (“Jane Doe,” not “Mrs. John Doe.”) and town of residence. Earlier we mentioned “zoning.” The paper for which I worked had 25 editions covering 60 communities, and divided into five geographic zones. Releases or photos whose subjects represented three or more zones were more likely to be published in all editions.

Editors like “art.” If you have no photo, send your library’s logo on a glossy “ad slick,” stationery, a brochure, or disk. Many papers use logos, and may keep them on file.

Obtain signed releases of people you photograph. Many newspapers don't bother with releases, but your library could be liable if the photos show wards of the state; or if the patron is involved in a custody battle or abuse case. Can you combine the consent to photograph into the program registration? Post signs informing people that they may be photographed.

THE MEDIA KIT

A media kit is a double-pocket folder of material that you give to editors or reporters. You can mail kits annually, or use them to publicize special events. If publicizing a grand opening or centennial, have kits on hand for media who attend in person.

A media kit's design and content depend on your budget. The double-pocket folder can be glossy and imprinted with your logo; or plain, with a label of your name or logo. The kit usually comprises a folder, media release, fact sheet (answering who, what, when, where, why and how as brief bullet points), biography (if the release is about a speaker or staff member), backgrounder (one- or two-page history of the library or the event), "art" (a photo or your logo), printed matter (your newsletters or brochures), previous articles about the library, speaker, or event (photocopies should include the newspaper's name and publication date), your business card (most folder pockets have die cuts to insert cards) or a rotary file card (on plastic, or created on your computer, using several headings: INFORMATION, LIBRARY, ANYTOWN LIBRARY, LOCAL HISTORY, etc.). Creating the contents of your kit on computer makes it easy to update individual pieces. Save postage with an online media kit. The Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offers downloadable story, photo and graphic packages on its Web site.

YOUR MEDIA LIST

Does your library have a media list? If not, write down every newspaper, magazine, newsletter, radio and television station you and your patrons might use. Include local media serving religion, labor, business, seniors, ethnic groups, or local colleges. Include Web sites of your city or county, a community calendar, the convention and visitors bureau, local genealogical or historical societies, or any site that posts your information. Note the address, phone, fax, URL, and names of editors, reporters, or station managers who handle your news. For print media, include the title and frequency of publication. For broadcast media, include call letters, channel, and format. While an oldies music station may not have local programs, a news or talk station may offer several opportunities.

Keep your media list current, noting changes in deadlines, policies, call letters or formats (the talk

station may have switched to rock music). Editors and reporters change frequently, so you may use a title rather than the person's name. It's better to send a release to "Lifestyles Editor" than to address it to someone who is no longer with the organization.

Unless your newspaper or station is very small, send a release to each department that might mention your event. Don't expect an editor to route your release to several people.

Features and lifestyle editors or reporters do stories on volunteers, National Library Week, books and entertainment, and how social issues or national trends are viewed locally. News editors receive releases of library board meetings, financial matters, or Internet policy. Send news of your gardening lecture to the home and garden editor; your financial seminar to the business editor; your e-book collection to the technology editor. Send your calendar to the photo editor, who may cover your event as a "stand-alone," not as part of a story.

DEADLINES AND BEST TIMES

Work backward from the date of your event to determine when to submit your news. While daily papers can publish items on short notice, deadlines for monthlies are at least four to six weeks before publication. Broadcast media may require six to eight weeks or more, if they run your news at all.

Watch or listen to a station, or examine several issues of each publication, to note deadlines and see when your news appears. A daily paper may run certain news on certain days: a religion page on Saturday, senior news on Monday, and so on. My library receives good coverage from our area's monthly senior papers. They also use my photos.

If your event has a registration deadline, work backward from this date, noting the deadlines of the media, to determine when to submit your news.

Coverage may be less frequent during the holiday season, when the media must cover more events and run more advertising. Coverage may be best during the summer, when school is out and many organizations suspend meetings. It's also when photographers shoot more "enterprise" photos — they drive around and snap anything they find interesting. Photographers and editors consider "cute kid" photos too cliché, but publish them anyway. Offering refreshments helps draw the media, especially if they work through lunch or dinner. If media outlets have your program calendar, they'll probably call you.

HELPFUL WEB SITES

In addition to books about publicity, two useful

sites are the ALA's electronic mailing list, PR Talk, at <<http://www.ala.org/membership/lists.html>> or Library Media & PR, at <<http://www.ssdesign.com/librarypr/index.html>>. Subscription to both sites is free.

BE AVAILABLE, BE PREPARED

Development is critical — not fundraising, but developing both a proactive and reactive relationship with the media. When the media contact you for story ideas, photo opportunities, or reference questions, do they receive prompt cooperation or participation? If you cannot immediately respond, ask how long you have to return the call. While it seems unreasonable, a reporter who calls at 1 p.m. with a 1:30 deadline cannot wait until 2 p.m. for your response.

While members of the media are objective, they will hesitate to contact you or run your news if they've had a bad experience with you, or received no cooperation.

Conversely, do you contact the media to "pitch" story ideas or provide sources? Editors who work well with you will contact you frequently. Do you know their interests? If the publisher enjoys Mark Twain's works, he might be interested in a Twain book discussion.

Also critical is developing a policy for dealing with the media. Most people, media included, think that everyone who works at a library is a librarian. A reporter who calls might quote whoever answers the phone, whether it's the director, a librarian, a page, or a custodian. Anything you, your board, or your staff says may be considered "on the record."

Staff or board members who speak to the media should tell the director to whom they spoke, the name of the paper or station, and what was said. Develop policies whereby media inquiries are immediately routed to those designated and authorized to speak on the library's behalf. Develop "position papers" on Internet filtering, tax increases, or other situations, and make sure authorized staff members are aware of, and can articulate, the library's position.

While the above suggestions will improve your relationship with the media, you cannot control the media, or your audience. Despite your efforts, you may be misquoted. Perform damage control and move on. Don't depend on media coverage to attract patrons or boost attendance. The only guarantee is that there will be another issue of the paper, or another broadcast — and, with those, is another chance for your library to shine.

*For further information, contact at
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